

BERLIN

Last October my wife and I flew to Berlin for a few days' holiday. It is a place for which I have long felt a fascination. Berlin has been a principal focus for the history of much of the twentieth century in Europe, and even of the world. It was the capital of the Nazi Reich from 1933 to 1945 and was the symbol of the divided world of the Cold War from then until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. I regretted that I had not been to Berlin or East Germany before, because I knew that the stark contrasts between East and West were now much reduced and also very little remains of the notorious Wall.

With the aid of the internet my wife had efficiently found suitable flights and a comfortable modest hotel, which was in a quiet residential district in the former western sector. It was ten minutes' walk from the Kurfürstendamm, the fashionable shopping street known familiarly as the Ku'damm. This is so called because it was the route by which the Elector (Kurfürst) of Brandenburg used to travel from his town residence to his hunting-lodge.

Although Berlin is large, getting around it is easy enough on the S-Bahn and the U-Bahn, although sometimes the routes and the interchanges are a little awkward. I think this is a result of the problems of re-integrating the systems which were split by the building of the Wall in 1961. Our first whole day in Berlin was not cold nor was it wet but it was cloudy and grey. Our first goal was the Reichstag (Parliament). It stands near the Brandenburg Gate and is just inside what was West Berlin. The route of the Wall ran just a few yards from the back of the Reichstag building. The Wall is no longer there, but the line of it is clearly visible.

There was a long queue of visitors and a strict security check as we entered the building. The parliament chamber was not open, but we all took the lift to the roof terrace to see the striking glass cupola designed by Sir Norman Foster. Although there is a spiral ramp inside the cupola, it was unfortunately closed for maintenance, but the visit was still worthwhile to inspect the structure close up, to look out over the impressive expanse of the city and to realize just how flat the North German Plain can be.

We had our lunch in the Sony Centre – a remarkable structure built in 2000 with a huge glass dome over a circular piazza. It made me think of the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Millennium Dome. We visited the Musical Instrument Museum nearby, which has a wide collection of early instruments such as krummhorns, cornemuses, viols and harpsichords. The lids of all the keyboard instruments were open and it was a great strain to obey the strict instruction that touching the keys was “verboten”. There was also a huge 1929 Wurlitzer and, strangely enough, a grand three-manual organ from a village in Somerset. It was delightful to be able to listen on head-phones to some of the instruments.

Next day the weather was warm and sunny and we went to Schloss Charlottenburg, the Summer Residence built about 1700 for Sophie Charlotte, wife of the Elector Friedrich III, and later the home of Frederick the Great of Prussia. We strolled through the extensive grounds surrounded by the yellows, reds and browns of the autumn leaves brilliant in the clear sunshine and then toured the magnificent palace.

I also walked along the Karl-Marx Allee to see the stolid, domineering, Stalinesque blocks of flats and offices of the old eastern sector. I saw one the main remaining

sections of the Wall near the Nordbahnhof, where there is a small historical display. This section of the east-west divide ran along one side of a main road and for a few weeks in summer 1961 it was possible for people to escape from the east through the windows of flats along the street, before they were bricked up. There was a church on the same (eastern) side of the street and one Sunday morning members of the congregation from the west arrived to find a concrete wall just in front of the church's main door blocking their way in. Later the church was demolished and there is a haunting photo of the spire at an angle of 45 degrees as it falls.

Many of these places I had planned to see, but one visit was unexpected and was the result of a conversation on the morning we left home. The phone rang as we were finishing breakfast. I explained to the friend who had called that we could not talk for long as we were about to set off for Stansted on our way to Berlin. My friend is interested in a British agent called Sigismund Payne Best, who happened many years ago to live in the house now owned by my friend. He immediately said, "You could visit Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, where Best was imprisoned for most of the War."

I had heard of Sachsenhausen, but I did not know that it was near Berlin. The idea floated around in my mind and on the third day of our visit I determined to go there. It is near Oranienburg about an hour away at the end of one of the S-Bahn lines. It was another beautiful clear day and the autumn colours looked lovely in the northern Berlin suburbs. Oranienburg is a typical clean, well cared for, small German town. I walked the mile and a half to the camp along suburban roads and past a playing-field. Incongruously, the entrance is at the end of a quiet road of comfortable detached houses.

I rented an "acousti-guide" at the visitors' centre and began my exploration. Various locations at the site were marked with a number and I could press the corresponding number on my hand-held set to listen to an explanation. Sachsenhausen was constructed in 1936 and was the first purpose-built concentration camp. It was shaped like an equilateral triangle with each side about half-a-mile long. The huts in which the prisoners were kept radiated out from a central point on one of the sides of the perimeter triangle where the guard-tower was built. The chilling reason for this was that one machine-gun on the roof could easily cover all the huts and passage-ways between them.

Altogether some 200,000 people were held in Sachsenhausen between 1936 and 1945. It was not an extermination camp, but nonetheless tens of thousands of people died there through ill-treatment, malnutrition and so on. All deaths in the camp had to be notified to the appropriate authority, but eventually as the numbers spiralled upwards, in an attempt to disguise from the local populace just how bad things were, a special secret bureau was set up to record this information.

Most of the huts have gone, but the guard-house, the prison block and the infirmary are still there. One hut still contains bunk beds showing the desperately crowded conditions in which the inmates lived. In the infirmary medical crimes were committed: there were compulsory sterilizations, experiments on humans and even murders. Part of the 'death strip' round the perimeter of the camp between the main wall and an electric fence has been re-constructed: anyone venturing into that would have been shot. In front of the guard-house is a large semi-circular parade-ground. Here there would be regular roll-calls. Sometimes people would be forced to stand there for long periods in extreme discomfort.

To mark the site of each hut there is a simple rectangular stone block. Visitors have placed small stones on the top of every one of these like memorials on a tomb.

After a couple of hours I walked back to Oranienburg following one of the many groups of school or college students who had been visiting the site. I ate a sandwich and drank a cup of coffee in a small café and watched people doing their shopping. It seemed strange to see such ordinary things going on.

As I sat on the train back to central Berlin to rendez-vous with my wife, my mind was occupied with thoughts not just about the dreadful cruelty that had gone on in Sachsenhausen, but about the still worse Auschwitz and Treblinka and about the whole Holocaust. It's easy to be shocked; it's easy to blame a generation now very largely gone from this world; it's easy to distance ourselves from such enormous wickedness; it's easy to think we would never have countenanced it.

An idea from Swedenborg came into my head: "Evils cannot be removed unless they appear" (*Divine Providence* 278). The evidence of the Holocaust shows what evil can lurk in human nature. But has the world learnt something from those terrible events in the middle of the twentieth century? The European Union grew out of the determination of a few idealistic politicians and men of influence to avoid a repetition of the World Wars and their associated horrors. With the not insignificant exception of Yugoslavia, there has broadly been peace in Europe since 1945. Even the Soviet Empire collapsed without major bloodshed. Has the appearance of those evils in the 1930s and 1940s been followed by some removal of them, or at least some diminution?

But perhaps we should turn the light onto ourselves. The parable of the plank of wood and the speck of dust (the beam and the mote) is always very telling. We believe and pray that such extremes of cruelty and viciousness are not, and never will be, part of us. But with the words "Evils cannot be removed unless they appear", Swedenborg particularly wanted to point out that, unless we do search out and face up to the evil tendencies hiding away in the darker corners of our personality, we shall never give the Lord the opportunity to help us overcome them and to remove them.

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